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ABSTRACT

The advance of science and technology, the rise of mass consumerism, the deterioration of families, and other factors have enormous implications for career counseling. This digest outlines a constructivist career counseling perspective. This perspective is based on the following concepts: there are multiple realities and no single "God's eye" view of reality; humans are "self-organizing" entities and each person's life is a story, or set of stories; individuals "construct" their own selves through the interpretations they make and the actions they take; each self has several voices ("polyphonic"), such as the voice of health and well being and the voice of intimacy; people are "meaning-makers" using language and actions to make meaning out of daily activities; and people require reflection of their daily decisions to become empowered. Therefore, constructivist career counseling is a general method of life planning. It presents the counselor and client as allies, it uses receptive inquiry so that the client feels simultaneously safe and challenged, it helps clients recognize patterns of influence which shape their thinking, and it emphasizes the importance of life experience, the creation of new categories of interpreting experience, and creating meaning through activity. It rejects a reductionist and partial view of personality and social life. (RJM)

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by R. Vance Peavy

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-61

Constructivist Career Counseling

R. Vance Peavy

Overview

Counseling as a profession has developed in a social context. The advance of science and technology, the rise of mass consumerism, the deterioration of families, neighborhoods, and small communities, and the increasing irrelevance of traditional authority, all create problems for people trying to cope with everyday living. At the same time the modernist ideas of progress, productivity, and perfectibility, buttressed by the belief that objective rationality would eventually "cure all," carry people into more complex and disturbing life circumstances. In this modernist context, counseling took on the trappings of Technical Rationality (Schon, 1983) (e.g., objectivity, neutrality, expertness, behavioral reductionism, quantification, measurement) and aspects of instrumental reason (Taylor, 1991) (e.g., efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability) -- all of which belong more to economists than to counselors.

These social transformations have enormous implications for career counseling. Client lives are increasingly characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict. Globalization and the undercutting of traditional customs radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects most personal experience. In certain ways the 1990's are better than previous decades (for some) and in other ways the 90s are simply awful (for many). To quote Dorothy, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto." In order to help individuals navigate these changing contexts, counseling is in need of *revision* and *re-formation*. Counselors must comprehend both the scope and the effect of these transformations and how they intertwine with each individual and therefore with the self. In general, this means that issues such as "self-construction" instead of "self-presentation," "self-as-narrative" instead of "self-as-traits," and "life-planning" instead of "career choice," become of paramount importance to career counselors.

The author has begun to outline a constructivist career counseling perspective which is designed to be appropriate to the post-industrial/post-modern context (Peavy, 1992, 1993, 1993a, 1994). The main concepts and practical career-counseling procedures from this perspective are outlined below.

Constructivist Concepts

Constructivist thought has its roots in philosophy, psychology, science, and cultural studies. Some constructivist concepts which can be applied to counseling include the following:

1. There is no single "God's eye" view of reality—rather, there are multiple realities. Although there is no "one right way" to think, feel, or do, some ways are better than others. One of the challenges for constructivists is to devise ways of ascertaining better and worse ways of thinking, acting, and being, usually by considering more vigorously the consequences of our thinking and acting; examining the assumptions and beliefs underlying our alternatives; and taking individual choice more seriously.

2. Humans are "self-organizing" entities, not a set of traits or repertory of behaviors. Each person's life is a story, or set of stories—an evolving biographical narrative under continuous revision.

3. Individuals "construct" their own selves through the interpretations they make and the actions they take. Increasingly, societal conditions call for individuals to be active and reflective selves, aware of the contexts in which they live, and capable of becoming agentic—at times resistive—and creative in relationships and work.

4. A self is "polyphonic"; it has several voices. Four important voices are the voices of health and well-being: the voice of intimacy: the voice of work life and learning ; and the voice of spirituality.

5. People are "meaning-makers" and word-munchers. They use language and action to make meaning out of daily activities. The most important personal meanings are relational. They are constructed through interactions with others and with aspects of the surrounding world.

6. To exist as an empowered person requires reflection and examination of the assumptions underlying daily decisions and actions. Critical reflection enables the building of a world-view which includes the following elements:

- A wholistic rather than reductive psychology of people.
- The moral idea that self-fulfillment is "good"—one should strive to become what one is capable of be ing.
- A tripartite concept of personal freedom. First, one is *responsible* for one's own thinking and actions. Second,

personal freedom is dependent on the *quality of relationships* which one builds and maintains. Third, personal freedom is influenced by the kind and quality of one's engagement in *meaning beyond one's own ego* (transcendent meaning) in such phenomena as nature, society, art, hobbies, God, compassionate action on behalf of others, and work.

Practical Counseling Considerations

Constructivist career counseling is a general method of life planning. It is a philosophical and psychological framework from which to work, rather than a set of techniques. However, certain counseling interventions are clearly constructivist.

Collaboration

The counselor and client are allies, with each making significant contributions to counseling. The counselor is an expert on the counseling process and the client is an expert on his or her own life experience.

Receptive Inquiry

The counselor promotes inquiry into the client's life-world within a context where the client feels simultaneously safe and challenged. Receptive inquiry tools include meaning-generating questions, metaphorical transformations, the use of artwork and objects to create meaning, autobiographical writing, visualization, and dialogical discussion.

Pattern Recognition

The counselor and client try to identify "patterns of influence" which are shaping the client's thinking and acting, especially influential relationships. Relationships, informal relations with peers and family, and mediated relationships such as those generated by media, often are more influential in career development and job-getting than traditional psychometrically-oriented career counseling activities.

Primacy of Life Experience

The counselor and client work directly with the client's life experience (i.e., with perceptions and personal meanings as revealed through narrative, journaling, interview dialogue, concept-mapping, artwork, and other self-revelatory activities). Counseling is not so much a matter of "initiating" change as it is a matter of influencing change already underway —influencing the direction of an "evolving self." Client resistance or reluctance is a concept not used by constructivist counselors. The constructivist assumption is that whatever a client is doing or thinking is necessary for the client's coping or survival, given the client's immediate frame of reference.

Mindfulness

The constructivist career counselor regards mindfulness as a desirable goal for both clients and counselors. The essential elements of mindfulness are (a) the creation of new categories of constructs to help interpret experience, (b) expanding openness and receptivity to new information, both internal and external, and (c) the awareness of more than one perspective on any aspect of one's life-world, including career. Critical reflection is a key tool in developing mindfulness (Peavy, 1994).

Creating Meaning Through Activity

It is involvement in activities such as work experience, cooperative education placement, job shadowing, volunteering, work-site visitation, and work simulation, which can provide the basis for personal meaning. The usefulness of such activities to clients is greatly enhanced through "reflection-on-activity" and "discussion and dialogue" with a counselor. Activity provides the raw materials (experiences), but it is reflection and counseling activities such as interview dialogue, group discussion, journaling, concept-mapping, dependable strengths analysis, and metaphorizing of experience and self, which influence both the evolving self and career decision-making.

Conclusion

Constructivist career counseling represents a "turn" in the history of counseling. It is a turn away from a reductionist and partialed view of personality and social life—and the accompanying view of counseling as driven by a need to correct human deficit—and toward a view of the person as wholistic, self-organizing, and maker of meaning. It is a turn away from "psychometric self" and toward "storied self." The constructivist approach offers counselors and clients a method of collaboration and co-participation in meaning-making counseling activities. This method enables clients to construct self and to make sense of worklife in the 21st century.

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